SPECIAL GIFTS CELEBRATION

BICENTENNIAL FUND, THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (U.S.A.)

SAN DIEGO, CALIFORNIA

A MATTER OF VALUE

1. The Value of Your Soul
2. The Value of a Tradition
3. The Value of Wealth

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1. THE VALUE OF YOUR SOUL

"And Jesus summoned the multitude with the disciples, and said to them, 'If any would come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who would save their life will lose it; and those who lost their life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. For what is one profited, if one gains the whole world and forfeits one's life? For what shall one give in return for one's life?'"

-Mark 8:34-37 (Inclusive Language Lectionary)

"What shall it profit a man or a woman to gain the whole world and lose his or her soul?"

Some time ago I was part of a seminar in Washington which brought together a group of Presbyterian ministers and government officials who happened to be Presbyterians. There were twelve of us. We were in a van, waiting at the gate of the White House. A Secret Service man asked us for our driver's licenses in order to do a security check. Mine was lost; more accurately, it had been stolen. In any event, all I had on my person with my name on it was a church business card and the church credit card. I tried the business card. The Secret Service man disappeared into his office, returned with security badges, the kind you wear around your neck, with the licenses clipped on. When he came to me, he said, "Mr. Buchanan, may I talk with you?" I climbed out of the van amidst the laughter of my colleagues who were telling him that I was indeed a very real threat to national security. He asked if I didn't have anything which would simply assure them that I was who I claimed to be. Apparently, I had lost more than my wallet and some money... my identity was at stake. So I pulled out the church American Express Card which does have my name on it. He seemed to be greatly relieved. I was approved. American Express got me in the White House - when my word, the assurances of my distinguished colleagues and my employment at the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago were brushed aside. I'm glad I had not left home without it.

Shortly thereafter, I encountered a John Updike short story entitled The Wallet. It is about Fulham, a retired broker, who "had assembled a nice life - blue-eyed wife still trim and presentable after thirty years of marriage, red-haired daughter off in the world and doing well, handsome white house in the older suburbs."

Fulham spends his time managing his own investments and those of a favored few old clients in an upstairs room. Every morning he goes to his room with the Wall Street Journal, a second cup of decaffeinated coffee, to make phone calls, look out the window at his neatly manicured lawn, to survey and enjoy the world he has gained.

And then disaster strikes. One morning he can't find his wallet. Now, if you are not an obsessive person you may not understand what this story is about. If you are, if you spend as much time as I do in a state of agitation because you can't find your keys or pen or glasses... you may find it funny and provocative. Fulham looks everywhere: under chairs, beds, he even goes through pockets of suits he hasn't worn for months. He goes a little berserk... His wallet was "a friendly adjunct to his person, a reminder, in its delicate pressure upon his left buttock, of his new stage of life... containing charge cards for Bay Bank, Brooks Brothers, Hertz, Visa, Amoco, American Express, Master Charge, The Harvard Co-op, Massachusetts General Hospital - plus his plasticized driver's license and cards signifying his membership in the Museum of Fine Arts, country club, Blue Cross/Blue Shield, social security and various sentimental mementos and pictures."

After several days of searching, Fulham announces to his wife that someone, obviously, has slipped into the house and stolen his wallet, punctuating his proclamation with obscentities.

His wife says: "I've never seen you like this."

"How am I?"

"You're wild."

"It was my wallet. Everything is in it. Everything. Without that wallet, I'm nothing."

Fulham finds his wallet. In fact, his grandson finds it folded up in a blanket on the couch. And Updike closes with him "squeezing the beloved bent book of leather between his two palms and feeling very grandpaternal, fragile, wiser and ready to die."

"Without that wallet, I'm nothing," Fulham said. Jesus said, "What shall it profit a person to gain the whole world and to forfeit his or her life?" He said that in the context of one of the most familiar, quoted and preached-on incidents in the New Testament. Everyone agrees that it is pivotal...

Jesus had just asked his disciples who they think he is. Peter has answered for them: "You are the Christ." Jesus has told them that he must suffer and die. Peter has argued with that, plainly not understanding who Jesus is. Jesus has rebuked Peter severely, and now this powerful sequence. "If anyone would come after me...deny self...take up a cross and follow. Whoever would save life will lose it. Whoever loses life for my sake will save it. For what does it profit a person to gain the whole world and forfeit life...lose his or her soul?" It is a theme Mark will return to time and time again.

The Greek word is psyche and it means "life" but also "soul" and also "self." In point of fact, it may not be your life you are in danger of losing. It's something deeper, more profound, more important, actually. It's your self, that essential core of being inside you, that integrity which if compromised or violated strips you of your soul. We are talking

here about soul... as in "Soul food" - food with character and honesty; undiluted, without benefit of artificial color, taste or tenderizers... real food: and as in "soul music" - honest, passionate music, reflective of the human situation; pathos, ecstasy, sensuousness, real music: Symphony Pathetique, Ode to Joy, Adagio for Strings, "I love you, Porgy": and as in "soul brother/sister," that one with whom you relate with no artificiality, no preliminaries, no word games, no manipulation and no posturing. Your soul... that essential authenticity deep inside you which you may be keeping pretty well barricaded and insulated... but which is the place where you live and move and have being, where your passion, ecstasy, tears and longing reside. Soul - your soul is the subject and that is what Jesus said is so valuable and so fragile that you could lose it in the process of gaining the world, or even a little part of it. It is the very heart of the Gospel.

What does it mean to be a Christian? There are different answers even in the New Testament. The Fourth Gospel and St. Paul suggest that it's a matter of believing in Jesus Christ. In Matthew the emphasis is on obeying Jesus' reinterpretation of the law. Luke emphasizes compassion and justice. The symbol of the Gospel of Mark is the lion, "strong, brave, courageous." To be a Christian, for Mark, is to follow Jesus on his costly way to the cross. Nowhere is the Christian claim made with more strength - nor the Christian promise with more eloquence. [see William Willimon, Interpretation, Mark, p. 154,155]

It is a particularly relevant proclamation for our day. We are asking strong and tough and courageous questions in a renewed way these days. Perhaps the notoriety of the television preachers has embarrassed us into taking our religion more seriously, inspiring us to an inquiry as to what exactly this stuff we say we believe is all about. Perhaps the challenge of the new biology, the environmental crisis, the continuing tragedy of urban deterioration... In any event I am convinced that there is a new integrity and earnestness of spirit alive in our culture. We want substantial religion. We want religion that can assume a place of respectable dialogue in the university. The most popular course at Harvard last year, reported the New York Times in a Sunday Magazine cover feature was Harvey Cox's basic Christianity and Culture. We want a faith capable of conversation with the world about the great issues confronting us. We are embarrassed, resentful in fact, when our faith becomes a caricature, a reactionary bastion of worn-out and irrelevant moralisms.

We're ready for tough, courageous religion - which doesn't hide behind pious gestures and cliches.

We want to know what it means to be a Christian in this wonderful but complex and challenging time, and the power and directness of Mark speaks to our need.

For another thing, we now know that the "new narcissism," the whole gospel of happiness through materialism, acquisition, accumulation, "whoever dies with the most toys wins" is a lie. It doesn't work. It isn't true.

The movie "Wall Street" was not a great motion picture. In many ways it was grossly oversimplified, but it was a two hour commentary on our text this morning. It is about Bud Fox, an aspiring, ambitious young broker and Gordon Gekko, a fabulously wealthy trader. Fox wants what Gekko has, is slowly seduced by the glittering allure of Gekko's life, finally sells out, does some inside trading, gets rich, loses his soul and then, a little too predictably, gets honest, loses his money but regains his soul.

The point is critical. We have tried to define ourselves in terms of what we earn, buy, accumulate. "Without that wallet, I'm nothing." In the past two decades we have undergone a revolution of the spirit. Altruism has been replaced by greed. Hope has been replaced by resignation masquerading as realism. Twenty years ago this culture was inspired by a noble and good ideal. We could, we believed, build a world in which people were free from racism, poverty, hunger, unnecessary illness, and a world moving in the direction of peace. Twenty years ago, it was neither silly nor uncommon for college students to express their personal hopes for the future in terms of contributing to the general welfare and reconciliation and peace of the country and the world. We know the extent of the revolution that changed that. To continue to believe that the highest and best a person can achieve is to contribute to the healing and wholeness of the world - is, today, to be scorned, dismissed as a naive, do-gooder, worse yet - a "liberal." We put aside the noble dreams and replaced them with a more manageable one - get rich. When young people are asked today - about their hopes, dreams and aspiration for the future - many answer by saying what they hope to earn and own.

Even religion, in the age of Narcissism, became intensely individualistic and personalized. The most popular varieties continue to market personal salvation like soap powder and take a strict "hands off" policy about the great societal issues which confront us and which challenge us and make demands of us. The church has followed suit - or has wanted to, it seems. We Presbyterians are obsessed with our declining market, wringing our hands over the fact that numbers are down: that we aren't mainstream or mainline anymore: that we are not keeping pace with competing groups or with the secularism of our culture. We must be concerned, but sometimes our concern is expressed in ways that raise significant questions of theological integrity.

Martin Marty, in a whimsical editorial about the obsessive and frantic interest in mainline church growth and church growth statistics, notes that the Mormons, who are growing, are willing to make 1,500 house calls to produce one "friendly opening" and that the Episcopalians who are declining, haven't made 1,500 house calls since the death of Thomas Cranmer in the 16th century.

We are tempted, as people who love the church and want it to survive and succeed, to keep away from these "hard sayings" of Jesus', about taking up a cross and giving life away, this unusual harshness. We are inclined to talk about the benefits of religion, not the costs.

<u>The Wall Street Journal</u> published, and Roof and McKinney reprinted, a delightful article by a Kansas City advertising executive who, with tongue

in cheek, has come up with a marketing plan for revitalizing America's major religious faiths."

"My strategy is to consolidate the various name brands, even the strong flagship brands like Southern Baptist into one identifiable, Exxon-like entity. The target audience here is Mom, Dad, Butch and Sis - solid suburban Americans who want a little God in their life and somewhere to go before branch. After test-marketing various possibilities, I have decided upon the name Middle American Christian Church, or MacChurch, for ad purposes. I will not be sure of MacChurch's theology until focus groups are run, but I plan on following the promotional path blazed so successfully by Holiday Inn. In other words, this will be your 'no surprises' church. When Dad brings the family here, he can be sure that they will not be asked to speak in tongues, handle snakes or give money to the Sandanistas."

Among the ad man's proposals are a new brand of Judaism for baby boomers and a "market segmentation" approach for Roman Catholicism. "RC Light for post-Vatican II liberals, RC Classic for traditionalists and RC Free for those more interested in liberation theology than Papal Bulls."

"Protestantism," he says, "presents marketers with special problems: the individual churches will have to understand that there is just so much theological shelf space, that product differentiation is not viable for go-as-you-please Protestantism. Thus, the Middle American Christian Church or MacChurch." [see American Mainline Religion, Roof and McKinney, p. 229]

Now, no one is quite that bold about it, but there is among us the sense that if we were a little more market conscious, if we stopped asking people to give and started giving them what they want, we might be more successful. And there are plenty of success models to emulate.

However, just at the moment we begin to be convinced that the market strategy is correct, just when we inquire seriously of the super suburban churches booming with growth, just as we shift the weight of our theology to the supply side of the ledger, here comes Jesus - saying things like:

"If any comes after me and does not hate his own life - renounce all that he has...he cannot be a disciple...

and

What does it profit to gain the whole world and lose one's soul...

and

Whoever would save life will lose and whoever would lose life for my sake will save it...

and

If one would come after me - deny self - take up a cross and follow..."

What is at stake here is soul, not just the quality of life in our culture. What is at issue is that core of being, that essence of you - which is your soul.

One of the pioneers of modern psychological theory, Eric Erikson, taught that human life can be defined by a series of issues, which each individual must resolve. Erikson said that the crisis of middle adulthood is between "generativity and stagnation." Generativity is "the readiness to care for the next generation" - the willingness to live for a purpose larger than my own life. The danger, Erikson taught, is stagnation. If you don't make that commitment to care for life beyond yourself - either in your own children, or in some way the children who are the next generation - you stagnate. And, said Erikson, you will begin to indulge yourself obsessively - as if you were your own one and only child.

The psychiatrists and psychologists know that the more we give away the more we have. The more we hoard, save, protect and squeeze - the less we have and are. The issue is our own souls.

The heart of Christianity is the teaching of Jesus that in order to live you must love, and in order to love you must die. Put another way, the bold and radical proposal of the Gospel is that learning to love means learning to die. But in that process you gain something infinitely precious - your own soul.

The compelling power of the Gospel is that this man, Jesus of Nazareth, so thoroughly believed it - he lived it out. He so thoroughly loved God and his friends and the world and his own soul, that he died rather than compromise his integrity, his sense of who he was and what his life was about. Some of those people who first heard his words - lived them out and literally gave their lives away rather than compromise their hope and faith. And so, down through the centuries, disciples of Jesus have remembered and bravely lived out the power of his words - Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King, Desmond Tutu, Alan Boesak.

Sometimes history and circumstance draw the issue very clearly for us. When we visited Dachau last summer, the point was made for me eloquently. One of the remaining barracks is the is the "Priesterbunker," the barracks for ministers and priests who saw in Nazism an absolute conflict with devotion to Jesus Christ, who acted on that perception and who ended up in a concentration camp. And there is not a clergyperson - or a layperson for that matter, who does not look at that barracks and wonder, could I have done that? Would I have done that? There are times and circumstances when the issue is clearly drawn. That was one of them. And so Dietrich Bonhoeffer, knowing what was ahead, could write about cheap grace and costly grace and the familiar and stirring but also distressing lines:

"When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die."

Clearly Alan Boesak and Bishop Tutu and those around them, black and white, believe that time and circumstance are drawing the issue sharply in South Africa; and that their loyalty to Jesus Christ is forcing them to say

no to their government. I was reading some of Boesak's sermons recently to try to learn a little bit about his thinking because I do believe he is on the edge of the basic theological issue, as Bonhoeffer was fifty years ago. And I was interested to discover that his introduction to a collection of highly political sermons contains a warning about a too eager martyrdom or Christian masochism, "that dark longing within the hearts of so many Christians to be flogged into the arms of Jesus - or into the fires of hell." [The Finger of God, p. 8] That is, we are not all called to be a Bonhoeffer or a Boesak, nor does the issue come at all of us with equal clarity. History and circumstance differ and require different response.

William Willimon once wrote to the point:

"To be martyred is one way to pay for the faith, but I submit it's tough to pay, day by day, in a lonely, dull, ignored-by-pagans wilting that comes from waiting."

The cost is not alway dramatic, he says.

"The woman who devotes her life to raising children in need of a home, the man whose faithful devotion to a mentally ill wife is quiet and steady, the youth whose civil disobedience for conscience's sake leads to prison or exile, these are among the countless thousands, who through the centuries and in many contexts, have interpreted the text with their lives." [Interpretation, Mark, p. 156-7]

One who paid with everything she had was Eva Jane Price, Congregational missionary wife, in China in the 1890s. Her long correspondence with her parents in Des Moines has been published recently under the title China Journal. It is a fascinating, informative and moving story. She was 33, her husband 41, when they decided to go to Oberlin College with their two children to prepare for Missionary work. She was very human and winsome: wife, mother of three - two of whom died in childhood. She loved God, but she also loved her own life, children and her mother, and the farm in Iowa. It took three months to travel to China so a letter to her mother took six months to be answered. The letters are full of the stuff of our own humanity - the daily details of life in an utterly alien culture - which she did not understand and which called her "foreign devil." And, of course, the loneliness and isolation which caused one of her friends to go mad and another to decide to commit suicide. In an early letter she writes, "Mother, what do you think I wanted the other day? Well, I'll tell you if you'll promise never, never to tell - one of your big aprons so I could put my head in it and cry and imagine it was in your lap." [p. 29]

In 1900, eleven years after they left Iowa and Oberlin College, the Prices and their remaining daughter were murdered in the Boxer Rebellion. In her last letter, as the rebellion closes in on the small missionary compound she wrote... "Our lives are worth nothing unless the Lord keeps them. We are all expecting to die and God is giving us grace, and we pray that you at home may be abundantly blessed by him. We would not choose to die now and in any horrible way, but pray without ceasing that God will choose for us and make us glad to go the way he says." [p. 236]

Time and circumstance do not draw the issue as sharply for everyone. pray God that we do not have to face the issue as dramatically as Eva Price did, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer did, as Alan Boesak is.

But pray God that our good fortune does not protect us also from the opportunity to decide to live. Pray God that we are not so anesthetized by comfort and security and the orderliness of our lives that we never get around to living them by giving them away.

Jesus would say that you haven't valued your own soul - haven't really lived, in fact, until you have loved passionately and fully and deeply; loved enough to deny yourself, to forget yourself, to die a little or a lot. Jesus would say that to love deeply is always to die a little to self. If you are blessed you have already begun to learn that... to love a child, another person, a cause, God. To love fully is to die to self and simultaneously to be yourself, to have life more fully and abundantly than you ever imagined possible.

The heart of Christianity is that at the moment of self-giving you are more yourself, more alive than ever before.

The heart of the Gospel, as Peter and the disciples learned, is that when you have him as Lord and follow him - you know who you are... When you give your life to him, or when you give your life to to others, which is always very close to giving your life to him, you are given something back - your identity, yourself, your soul.

In his journal, Henry David Thoreau wrote:

"All that a man has to say or do that can possibly concern humankind, is in some shape or other, to tell the story of his love - to sing; and, if he is fortunate and keeps alive, he will be forever in love. This alone is to be alive to the extremities." [Thoreau's Journal, May 6, 1854]

What is the value of your soul? It is priceless. Protect it. Enhance it. Make it grow. You are not ahead if you gain the world and lose your soul.

You could gain your soul - your very life - if you learned to love enough to die.

Jesus said that. It is the truth.

2. THE VALUE OF A TRADITION

"Now when the Pharisees gathered together to Jesus, with some of the scribes, who had come from Jerusalem, they saw that some of Jesus' disciples ate with hands defiled, that is, unwashed. (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they wash their hands, observing the tradition of the elders; and when they come from the market place, they do not eat unless they purify themselves; and there are many other traditions which they observe, the washing of cups and pots and vessels of bronze.) And the Pharisees and the scribes asked Jesus, 'Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with hands defiled?' And Jesus said to them, 'Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, "This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines." You leave the commandments of God, and hold fast human tradition.'"

-Mark 7:1-8 (Inclusive Language Lectionary)

You leave the commandments of God, and hold fast human tradition.

Two hundred years ago, in May of 1789, thirty-four Presbyterians met in Philadelphia and decided that they were a national organization... the Presbyterian Church. They represented 420 congregations scattered throughout the new nation and its frontier. Together they were the largest, best educated, most orderly church in the new world. They had a strong sense that they were a part of the new era in world history which was coming to pass with the birth of the American Republic, and they had important contributions to make. They had been there from the beginning. Two Presbyterian churches, established in 1640, were already nearly 150 years old in 1789.

Earlier this year we remembered that event as we celebrated our Bicentennial. We did so in a world which is radically different and from a posture in the world which has changed radically and is still changing. The simple unvarnished truth is that there are 25% fewer Presbyterians in our country than there were 20 years ago. In May Time Magazine featured a major article, "Those Mainline Blues" which explored the phenomenon which is now familiar to all observers of our culture, the mainline dilemma, or the demise of the mainline church. We may, that is to say, be looking at the end of a major religious tradition known as Reformed/ Presbyterian. It is a valuable tradition, one that baptized, nurtured, challenged me and continues to do so. We are here because we care about the Presbyterian Church. And there is a sense in which my own commitment to the Bicentennial fund is because I believe it is a way I can contribute to the shape of my church's future.

The group that met in Phildelphia in 1789 understood that it was time to think anew. The presiding officer was John Witherspoon, President of the College of New Jersey at Princeton. Thirteen years earlier he had signed his name to the Declaration of Independence, just two blocks down

the street, the only clergyman to do so. To show his support of the new society, Witherspoon and several of the others had stopped wearing a wig in 1776.

They elected John Rogers, one of their own, to be Moderator. And then the Presbyterians went to work. They appointed a few missionaries to organize churches on the frontier: they commissioned several representatives to open discussions with other Christian churches, they had a fierce argument about a hymnal, they discussed the schools and colleges they had founded and they composed a letter to the President of the United States, George Washington. Calvinists that they were, they presumed not only to speak to their congregations, they spoke for the church to the world, always very risky business. "We ought not to forget our consequence in the Republic," they said. It is one of our traditions.

Presbyterian values have been, I would submit, like seasoning in the larger context of American culture. We have never been as prominent numerically as we were in 1789, but we have always been a critical minority, a lively source of flavor for the rest of the culture, like salt of the earth, leaven in the loaf and even, on occasion, light in the darkness.

The values, I submit, are critical.

-**Education, for instance.** It had its source in our early notion that lay people should not have to depend on anyone to tell them what was in the Bible, so it was imperative that people read and understand. And so Calvinists dominated both private and public education before the Civil War, founding two-thirds of all the colleges and universities. How very desperately our nation needs a new commitment to quality public education.

-**And the Deliberative Process** as a fairly dependable way to establish consensus and thereby the basis for responsible people to live together. Presbyterian Ethicist, Don Shriver, said in a discussion of the abortion debate, and the other ethical dilemmas lurking in the near future such as genetic engineering, that we must recover the tradition of careful deliberation and compromise, instead of the currently fashionable approach of confrontation followed by shouting at one another.

-**And the Intersection of Religion and Life,** there from the beginning and expressed in a centuries' old pattern of doing good in the world which by some odd logic is spurned today so that "do-gooder" is a criticism rather than a compliment...

-**And the tradition of Conscience, Dissent and Suspicion of Authority.** Calvin and Knox were dissenters; they did not live easily with the establishment. One of our earliest preachers was thrown in jail for preaching in New York without a license and we've been doing it ever since. Elijah Parish Lovejoy was a Presbyterian editor of a St. Louis newspaper, burned out by a pro-slavery mob and later killed by another mob in Alton, Illinois for his anti-slavery editorializing. Henry Van Dyke risked his prestige and reputation by voicing a lonely protest against the Spanish-American War. Bill Coffin did the same during Viet Nam and no Presbyterian my age or older was not asked at least once by a nervous pulpit committee

during the sixties if we would ever engage in civil disobedience.

Alan Boesak's challenge to apartheid is perhaps the most serious one of all because it is based on a clearly Calvinist foundation which, after all the economic, sociological and geo-political arguments have been aired, simply cannot accommodate itself to a system in which authority and power is exercised by 20% of the people.

-And Toleration, Openness, a Willingness to admit our mistakes, a refusal to take ourselves too seriously because we know in our hearts that God alone is sovereign. Even at our most belligerent we never claimed to be the only church or the only answer to the truth, or the only way to worship or express the faith.

Education - deliberation process - suspicion of concentrated authority - the intersection of religion and life - toleration. I submit that the world needs those values which have been born and nurtured by the Presbyterian tradition.

May we be reminded, during the year of our 200th anniversary, that the church of Jesus Christ is not called to be successful, but to be faithful, whether or not that means successful, that the Lord himself was crucified, not elected Chancellor of Jerusalem, that the whole point seems to be redemption, through suffering, strength through weakness, and that when God's people start allowing the world to set the agenda and to define what success means we have fallen into a very serious trap of idolatry for which the prophets of Israel had a very graphic description: whoring after Babylon, they called it.

In the meantime it is tempting to look to the past as the only residue of meaning and hope. Presbyterian journalist, Vic Jameson warns that "It is safe to say that every generation since Adam has looked back wistfully at the good old days." [Presbyterian Survey, June 1988] The fifties, for instance, before Civil Rights and Angela Davis and the turmoil and stress of the sixties.

Jesus knew the religious tradition of the past. He chose to break with it. When the orthodox religionists challenged him he put it very plainly... "You leave the commandment of God and hold fast to human traditions."

There is within the Gospel of Jesus Christ a permanent discomfort with the status quo, the establishment, the "tradition." It is part of the genius of Presbyterianism, even while it is celebrating its own traditions, to know that, and therefore, to lean into the future with hope.

The Time article ended enigmatically and wrongly, I thought.

"Perhaps, then, mainline churches are being cast into a role... not unlike that of the European refugees who are known to history as Pilgrims and Puritans." That's it, I think.

If we were mainline, we are better suited not to be. We are, by nature, a minority, always slightly at odds with the establishment, always

proposing a counter-culture, an alternative value system.

But then, this conclusion... "Unlike their 17th century predecessors, they have no New World to conquer."

That is wrong. Part of who we are as Presbyterians in this culture is a people who are not interested in conquering, but are absolutely committed to living faithfully and thoroughly in the New World that is most certainly emerging.

We have work to do. We have new churches to build and old ones to love and nurture.

We have declining churches and big, healthy, growing churches and there are still three million of us.

We have the grace to laugh at ourselves and the maturity to know that God's church can never be a pious enclave.

We have a tradition of passionate love for God and God's world and God's Kingdom of peace, and justice and love.

We have a lot going for us and even though you and I won't see it, my strong sense is that there will be plenty of lively, contentious, caring and bright Presbyterians around to celebrate a Tricentennial.

3. THE VALUE OF WEALTH

"And as Jesus was setting out on a journey, some one ran up and knelt before him, and asked, 'Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?' And Jesus said, 'Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: "Do not kill, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother."' And the questioner said to Jesus, 'Teacher, all these I have observed from my youth.' And Jesus looked upon the questioner with love and said, 'You lack one thing; go, sell what you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.' Dismayed by this word, the person went away sorrowful because of having great possessions.

"And Jesus looked around and said to the disciples, 'How hard it will be for those who have riches to enter the realm of God!' And the disciples were amazed at Jesus' words. But Jesus said to them again, 'Children, how hard it is to enter the realm of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the realm of God.' And they were exceedingly astonished, and said to Jesus, 'Then who can be saved?' Jesus looked at the disciples and said, 'With human beings it is impossible, but not with God; for all things are possible with God.'"
-Mark 10:17-27 (Inclusive Lectionary Language)

How hard it will be for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God!

My, I wish he hadn't said that!... In his book, Harvard Diary, Child Psychiatrist, teacher and author, Robert Coles, reports his research on how children of wealthy families come to their values. He was particularly interested in how religious, church families dealt with the ethical issues of their own wealth. A prosperous New Orleans attorney said..

"I can find passages to make me feel good about this life I've always enjoyed, and always will enjoy until I die. But I have a legal mind - I majored in English, liked literary criticism... so I can't overlook what I read. I can't turn a clear-cut message into a confusing one... He gave us that unforgettable image of the camel trying to get through the eye of a needle. Well, I guess I'm one big camel, and even now, I can anticipate the crunch I'll be in."

Coles says it was "one of the most Biblical moments I will ever experience - the sight and sound of a professing Christian aware that he was in deep trouble." [Harvard Diary, "Christ and the Rich," p. 19-21]

It is a troublesome topic - this matter of Christ and wealth. There was a legendary incident once involving John D. Rockefeller, Jr. and Harry Emerson Fosdick. Rockefeller was the wealthiest Protestant layperson in the country. He was a devout Baptist: his contributions alone constituted

12% of the budget of the Northern Baptist denomination in the 1920s. By 1960 he had given away $552 million. He was a leading layman and chairman of the pulpit committee of Park Avenue Baptist Church in New York.

Rockefeller had a vision of the church of the future - non-sectarian, rational, world-embracing. He wanted the leading preacher of the day, Harry Emerson Fosdick, to be the pastor and he wanted to convince the Park Avenue Baptists to sell their new building and join him in a new venture on Riverside Drive. Fosdick, in the meantime, was being thrown out of the Presbyterian Church for being too progressive. Rockefeller was successful on all fronts. Fosdick was called. Riverside Church was built and was, and is, an embodiment of Rockefeller's vision. The legendary incident occurred in the early stages of negotiations between the wealthy Rockefeller and the progressive preacher. (They later became dear and life-long friends.) In Rockefeller's office, Fosdick was protesting that "he did not wish to be known as the pastor of the richest man in the country." Rockefeller responded, "Do you think that more people will criticize you on account of my wealth, than will criticize me on account of your theology?" [Robert Moats Miller, Harry Emerson Fosdick, Preacher, Pastor, Prophet, p. 161-162]

Now we may not be as large a camel as the attorney and we surely do not relate to the Rockefeller fortune, but I would propose to you that the differences are in degree and not essence. Comedian George Carlin knows that when he talks about our "stuff." We have to have more space, not so much to live in particularly, but to keep, protect and display our "stuff." One of the observable characteristics - and consistent behaviorism of the young urbanite is apartment hunting - the reason is that being upwardly mobile means accumulating stuff. We need more walls for our art, shelves for the stereo, drawers, closets, square feet... Some of us know about that very personally. If you didn't have much "stuff" as a child, chances are your "stuff" is pretty important to you. If you are defined economically by the Great Depression and therefore had parents who were frugal, never bought on credit, thought that even gasoline credit cards were evil and gasped when you told them what your last mortgage was - you know what I mean and "stuff" is important to you. E. B. White wrote a hilarious essay about moving from one apartment to another in New York City and the difficulty he had parting with accumulated but essentially worthless "stuff." I loved the essay because when we were preparing to move to Chicago, I used to check the alley every night to recover the treasures someone was discarding during the day. My children were doing the same thing - recovering baseball cards, beloved but worn out basketballs, beginners piano lesson books, treasures! college notes, textbooks. Why, you never know when you might need those notes on Introduction to Geology, or when it might be so muddy and awful out that those old sneakers would be perfect.

The kind of possessions we cherish is determined often by our profession. Not everybody owns jewels and furs and Jaguars. We might look at ads in The New Yorker, and The New York Times Sunday Magazine the way a voyeur looks at Penthouse, but for some it's art or records or books. A minister friend of mine tells about the spiritual crisis in his life when his study burned. All his books, all his sermon manuscripts, lectures, classes, files - were destroyed. He told that it felt like he hadn't

existed. He was deeply depressed, in grief. Later he came to understand his attachment and what it meant theologically. Finally he even understood that there was a new freedom in being unencumbered. But it was an extraordinarily painful experience.

There is a lot of ambiguity and discomfort about this topic and it is very much heightened by the incident which constitutes our text this morning.

Jesus and entourage are on their way to Jerusalem, on the way to the cross, that is to say. He has just rebuked the disciples for turning children away: "Let them come" he said, "to such belongs the Kingdom..." At just that moment a wealthy young man runs to Jesus, throws himself at his feet - creating an interesting contrast, to say the least: an aristocrat kneeling at the feet of a poor man and asking what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus recites the second section of the Ten Commandments which the young man has already kept. That is to say, he has done all the right things but he still doesn't feel right. He hasn't experienced God's love and his own salvation. Please notice how gentle Jesus is with him. He does not criticize or condemn. He simply issues a prescription: five imperatives: go - sell all - give to the poor - come - follow me. I don't know whether Mark had his tongue in his cheek when he wrote the next line, but I think he must have. It's a funny line. The young man's "countenance fell..." I should guess so. He was appalled, as a matter of fact, for Mark observes, "he had great possessions." He had a lot of them and he loved them.

The young man fades and Jesus makes an observation about wealth which astonishes his disciples. The official teaching of Judaism was that wealth is ordinarily evidence of divine blessing. Rich people were good people. The Scriptures of the Old Testament may be used both to support God's preferential treatment of the poor and also God's favor expressed in wealth, health, long life, possessions. But by the first century the popular position was that wealth was evidence of divine blessing: Poor people are sinners. They didn't have the resources or the time or the inclination to be good Jews. They were working full time just to survive. The disciples are amazed and disturbed to hear that it will be difficult for wealthy people to get into the kingdom because they assumed the kingdom was filled with them.

Then comes this stunning little parable with which Christian people have been arguing for twenty centuries: "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."

There have been some very imaginative attempts to get us out from under that one. In fact, the textual scholars who spend their time examining ancient manuscripts under a microscope say that there is evidence that this text has been tampered with repeatedly. We aren't the first ones, apparently, to wish he didn't say it or mean it.

Later scholars would try to help by pointing out that the Greek word for rope is quite similar to the word for camel and that what Jesus probably said was that it is easier for a rope, a piece of twine, to go

through the eye of a needle. At least the image is consistent. The task is difficult, but, in a sense, doable.

The most imaginative effort is the suggestion that ancient city walls had small openings through which late arrivers might safely enter the city without the danger of opening the gates. This opening, they contend, was called the "eye of the needle." A camel could get through - on his knees, with his owner pushing and pulling. It's a wonderful image. Preachers on Stewardship Sunday have been known to suggest that loaded camels, particularly, are going to have difficulty, and that the way to squeeze in is to unload some of the goods - as in a pledge to the church. It is an approach to fund raising not to be taken lightly. Scholars trace this interpretation to the ninth century and sadly conclude that the whole matter is spurious.

The sequence is not yet concluded, however. Assume that Jesus has used hyperbole, which, in fact, he did and which in fact was a respectable teaching method among the rabbis. Most agree that "if you want to follow me you must hate your parents" is hyperbole, not specific moral instruction. Assume that he had used an outrageous situation to make his point: that he intended to create some tension with his stern demand. The disciples are astonished. They aren't rich men: in fact, they are poor. But they immediately recognize that if what he said is true - all of them are in trouble. They love what they have even if it's one robe and one pair of sandals. They are no more willing than the rich, young man to sell all and give it away. "Who then can be saved?" they ask Jesus. And they get an enigmatic answer: "With human beings - with you - with human effort, creativity, hard work - it's impossible, but not with God. With God, all things are possible."

What we really must do is go back and look again at this interesting, wealthy young man. What actually was wrong with him? He's not bad. In fact, he's good, admirable, upright, generous and he is theologically sensitive. He's got courage and character. What's wrong here? What about him causes him to miss the grace and love of Jesus Christ? He is, by the way, the only person in the Gospel of Mark, who Jesus calls and who does not respond by following. He can't. He's not free to. That's what is wrong. He's imprisoned, I think, by his possessions. He's even sorry about it. There's a sense in which he knows what's wrong. In point of fact, what Jesus teaches him is that he doesn't own a thing actually. He's owned by his possessions, in service to them, dependent on them for happiness, security and joy.

He has worked so hard, been so successful, accomplished so much that there is no room in his life for grace; maybe there is a very fundamental character defect here. He's in a hurry - no time, no empty spaces for the surprising gifts of beauty God's world gives, no place perhaps for gifts of friendship and love. He stands in poignant contrast to the child Jesus has just used as an example of the Kingdom. Remember Karl Barth's lovely image of grace as a child on Christmas morning surrounded by gifts - and weren't we all touched by grace - just seeing those beautiful little children in the orphanage in Tijuana yesterday? The child hasn't earned a thing yet. The child knows that all of life is a gift: from the sun newly warm every morning, to the simple gifts of playing with friends, to the miraculous

appearance of food at mealtime, to the security of parental love and a warm bed, the child knows that all is grace. This young man has quite forgotten what it is to receive that which he has not earned.

It is not appropriate to resolve the tension in this text too quickly or easily. I believe it was meant to make us uncomfortable and reflective. But it is fair to observe that Jesus did not say go - sell - give, to every wealthy person he encountered. He had wealthy friends: Nicodemus, Zacheus, Joseph of Arimathea. He didn't tell them to sell it all. What he said to this young man was his personal prescription for salvation.

There is, I would submit, no more important task for modern American Christians than coming to terms with the reality of value and wealth. Bob Lynn, Presbyterian clergyperson and former executive with the Lily Foundation, said one time that the American mainline church has to do one of two things soon: either come to a new understanding of its own affluence or else get poor. I have been pondering that for several years and know he is right.

The **first** thing to do is to stop feeling guilty for who we are. Theologian, Douglas John Hall, in a book on the topic, The Steward: A Biblical Image Come of Age, points out how useless it is for middle class Western Christians to feel guilty for being middle class Western Christians. "One can sympathize with the impatience and occasional anger of ordinary people when they are addressed as if they were directly to blame for the abject poverty of multitudes..." a lesson for every preacher who has been tempted to scold the men and women who come to worship on Sunday for world starvation. And then Hall quotes Robert Hempfling who says it even clearer... "I'm tired of feeling guilty about being middle class and being characterized as mediocre, superficial and banal." [p. 85]

The **second** thing is not to resolve the tension Jesus created too easily by suggesting that we're not wealthy. We are wealthy. We are the wealthiest people in the world and in all of history. We who are wealthy are becoming wealthier - while the poor are becoming poorer. Tax breaks for us haven't trickled down on anybody. In a journal article a few years ago, two psychologists pointed out that we love "poor talk," but the reality is that in two decades our disposable income has risen 57%. It isn't true - that's "poor talk" - that we "had more when we earned less." What is true, these psychologists pointed out, is the "adaptation level principle": i.e., yesterday's luxuries have become today's necessities and that middle class Americans are susceptible to persuasion to spend it all: spend more than we have. The simple fact is that we have bought into the cultural ideology that "stuff" will make us happy, secure, content. And if you buy into that, you are imprisoned.

The **third** thing is to listen to Jesus and to hear what he said.

He did not condemn wealth. Wealth is not an evil in itself. Even Robert McAfee Brown, one of our most eloquent advocates of economic and social justice suggests that denial is not helpful. We cannot resign from the middle class he says.

The issue is responsibility: the responsive and responsible use of

what we have. And that is actually a theological question with its roots in our very basic and formative theological positions - i.e. our theology of creation. It is no coincidence that we are looking at the creation stories in Genesis with new scholarly intensity these days - for there -- in those stories, from the edge of history, we find a concept of God and a concept of our own humanness that is remarkably relevant. It is one of responsibility... Dominion as Stewardship, D. J. Hall calls it in a new book, Imagining God.

One of the consistent problems we have with this whole matter of wealth is that our basic theological stance is more Greek than Hebrew.

Canadian Theologian Hall argues that if you begin with the Greek premise that the world is a bad place, you will end up with a basically irresponsible posture regarding the things of this world. Hall says that the Biblical image of steward is very important and a steward is not simply one who makes a generous pledge - rather he/she is one who sees himself as a manager, a participant with God in which one is called to use responsibly the goods and wealth at hand.

In any event, Hall maintains that this positive and powerful theological image was watered down early in our history because of the force of Hellenism. Hellinism is defined by Hall as a "mishmash of Egyptian, Persian, Greek and other cultures created largely by the conquest of Alexander the Great." [p. 31 Stewardship]

And Hellenism is what shaped and molded both Western Civilization and Western Christianity.

The Gospel was Hebrew - in style. Christianity was born in Hebrew, thought and spoke and acted out of Hebrew background and confronted immediately a world becoming Greek.

The essence of the Hebrew world view - was that creation was a whole, not a layered affair, or a bifurcated affair - and that the whole is good. When God steps back, looks at creation, and pronounces it good, God is speaking Hebrew.

Hellenism - based on the philosophic categories of Greek Dualism, on the other hand, harbored what Hall called an abiding suspicion of matter.

"The material world, including of course human body, was regarded as inferior, the seat of evil, dangerous, fundamentally unreal. To get in touch with the Real, one had to slough off so far as possible one's material attachments together with the passions associated with them. Through such detachment one might rise to the realm of the spirit. Hence the function of religion - and philosophy - was to lift persons out of 'bondage to the flesh' and related them to the transcendent - realm of pure spirit. Salvation in Hellenism means salvation from the world." [p. 32]

In Hebrew thought, Sin is broken relationship.

In Greek, Sin is wrong thoughts and deeds.

In Hebrew - Faith is worldly, God blows breath into a body God has formed from dirt - the body - and all the wonderful things it does - is good.

Evil enters the world - through the human spirit. "Matter in this faith is the victim of spirit." [p. 33]

Hellenism infers that the material world itself is evil, including the body, and the source of sin. Hellenism suspects God made a mistake when we were created sexual. God - in Hebrew thought - had feelings, gets angry, loves, grieves... In Hellenism - God is characterized by apatheia, detached, cool, unmoved.

In its early formation stages Christianity as religion fell under heavy influence of Hellenism.

And thus - because of its strongly anti-material otherworldly tendency, the image of Steward atrophied before it had an opportunity to grow.

Hall sees a continuing Docetism, a despising the world in modern culture.

Certainly the toxic pollution of the air we breath, the water we drink, acid rain, and the human tragedy of overpopulation and the human and spiritual holocaust which is occurring in urban ghettoes - reveals a deep antipathy, bordering on hostility to the created world...

We now know, if we ever doubted it, that our technology will not save us and cannot serve as a foil for our despising of creation. The technology challenge we hoped might save us can easily destroy us.

Even religion participates in this hostility toward the world... Media religion continues the docetic heresy, Hellenism in living color, with fountains in the background.

"Perhaps the desire to escape from 'reality' has never been so strong as it is in our present time. It ca be observed that the most popular activities in the Western World today are activities that offer the illusion of escape: sex, sports, food, travel, entertainment. And perhaps the most escapist activity of all is religion." [p. 43]

Hall proposes a revivification of the Steward Image. It begins with the questions:

1. Do you or do you not love/care for this world? We are called to love the world as God loves it.

2. It proceeds with a realistic affirmation of one's personal power and influence (related to affirmation of goodness of creation and personal worth). "You have the power to love and change the world. Will you? We are called to co-create, to stand up and be fully human. "The Bible presents a God who calls us to stand on our own feet and be God's partners in creation."

3. Then Hall offers a new and fascinating rubric: The Stewardship of all Believers, as alternate for Priesthood of all -- which if ever understood we surely don't anymore... Our people think all it means is we don't need a priest to pray for us - which doesn't approach the power of the metaphor. [see p. 128,9]

The world needs people who love it. Rosemary Radford Reuther says that all the accumulated problems of several centuries are coming to crises in the next several decades... nuclear weaponry, population, economic injustice - poverty/wealth, and the ecology. Those crises are so large and profound that they can only be addressed by a profound love for the world: by people who know God's love for the world and who know how to be faithful by loving it effectively and creatively and living in it responsibly and productively.

In fact, productivity - and there does not seem to be a way to have productivity without someone making money, a lesson which the Soviets not only have learned but now openly acknowledge - is the only thing that can possibly feed the world's hungry people. We may not choose to apply it for good ends, but in point of fact, there is enormous potential for justice in the right use of the wealth we produce. We are all tired of unlikely analogies, but the truth remains that the cost of one new jet fighter could establish 40,000 village pharmacies and that one half the military expenditure of the Western nations would resolve water and agriculture problems which create famine, permanently. We could do that if we wanted to.

So -

1. Stop feeling guilty.

2. Don't deny that we are wealthy.

3. Listen to what Jesus said and did not say about wealth.

The **fourth** thing is to understand how intimate and personal this subject is for all of us. The detail that jumped out of this text this time for me is the note that when the young man said he had done all that the law required and still didn't feel right, Jesus "looking upon him, loved him." And then later, it happened again. The disciples are astonished at the eye of the needle business and Jesus "looks at them" in love and compassion and grace. This is personal. This is very near the heart of the matter for them and for us.

I think there is a sense in which he was absolutely, literally, fundamentally, accurate about the way things are with you and me - 2,000 years later.

There is a sense in which you and I don't own a thing which we are not willing to give away.

There is a sense in which you and I are owned by whatever we cannot and will not give away: a sense in which who we are is defined very

precisely by what we can or cannot give away.

That's the issue here. Let's not resolve it too easily and let's not compromise it. With the disciples, I am astonished - not simply by the demands he seems to be making of me - but by the truth I know in what he said. I identify with that rich young man. I don't own anything I can't give away. You can't live until you know something for which you are willing to give everything, including your life.

The final word is grace. Truly. Costly grace. With God all things are possible. You don't have to force it, or drag it in. He said it. He's not done with that young man. There will be other encounters: God loves us all - rich, poor and in between. "Jesus, looking upon him, loved him." God wants all of us to live fully, joyfully, free from frustration, anxiety and fear.

It's what the Gospel is about.

There is no resolution in text, nor is there much of a concluding resolution to these reflections. The words must take their own shape in your life - in ways known best and only to you. But do hear them again:

"- go - sell - give - come - follow - and you will have treasure in heaven."